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PP RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHIHL RUEHKUK
DE RUEHGB #2590/01 2271509
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P 141509Z AUG 08
FM AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 8856
INFO RUCNRAQ/IRAQ COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 002590

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/13/2018
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINS](#) [MOPS](#) [IZ](#)
SUBJECT: BABIL: SONS OF IRAQ TRANSITION KEY TO CONTINUED
PROGRESS

REF: A. BAGHDAD 2415
[1](#)B. BAGHDAD 2414

Classified By: Senior Advisor Gordon Gray for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

[1](#)1. (SBU) Separate walkabouts through the towns of Jurf as Sakhr (August 6) and Iskandariyah (August 7) -- both organized by the 4th Battalion/3rd Division -- indicated a security situation markedly improved from the previous year but still fragile. Local politicians and tribal leaders expressed the desire to move past sectarian divisions, but expressed concern about how to integrate the province's 9,471 Sons of Iraq (SOI) members -- many of them recent converts from extremist militias -- into the security forces or otherwise into the economy. Local people are seeking further support from the USG to ensure proper treatment of SOIs as the program prepares for Iraqi control in 2009, and as Babil prepares for Provincial Iraqi Control (PIC) in late 2008.
End summary.

Walking through last year's war zone

[1](#)2. (C) Jurf As Sakhr, a small Sunni town that was for years a hotbed of Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) activity, exemplifies the tremendous success that Coalition Forces (CF) and Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) have achieved in Babil with the AQI program -- and also the fragility of that progress. After walking the length of Jurf's main street alongside the Euphrates, Senior Advisor Gray and 4th Battalion Commander Colonel James met with Jurf town council (qadaa) chairman Sheikh Sabah al-Janabi and Abd-al Hadi, both leaders of the SOI program in the area. Before joining the SOI program, Sabah and Hadi - ex-Baathist military officers - were long-time participants in AQI activities as part of the Jurf cell the Jaysh al Islami (JAI) movement. The Jurf JAI cell split from AQI in late 2007 and has since become a conduit for over 200 local citizens -- mostly fellow Janabi tribe members and sometimes former AQI members -- to enter the SOI program. Violence in Jurf has decreased dramatically since mid-2007, and strong relationships between the CF and Jurf leadership now exist.

[1](#)3. (C) While enthusiastic about security improvements in Jurf, SOI leaders expressed reservations about the future of Sunni in a Shi'a-majority province. Sabah noted that less than ten percent of his members had been accepted into the Iraqi Police (IP), and that even those accepted were pending processing. Hadi told Gray that he was happy to see that Prime Minister Maliki had taken action against Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM), but said that he feared the 'Shi'a parties', namely ISCI and Dawa. (Strong Sunni nationalism was evident: Sabah at one point declared that Security Advisor Muwaffaq al-Rubaie was "an agent of Iran.") The short walk through Jurf showed how difficult it will be to find productive employment for local men. The town has no significant industry and only a couple of thinly stocked commercial

stands were open -- and these due in part to small grants recently provided by USG programs. The police station, also recently rebuilt with CERP funds, appears to be the only obvious source of future employment for many in the area.

14. (C) The following day, Gray walked (with heavy CF and IP escort) through the market in Iskandariya, a mixed but primarily Shi'a town of about 50,000, and met afterward with local qadaa leaders. A crossroads commercial town, Iskandariyah was much more economically vibrant than Jurf, with many people in the streets. A wide range of goods was available, including produce from Iran, Jordan and Turkey. While enjoying an improved security situation, Iskandariyah nevertheless remains a prime recruiting ground for JAM, as well as for AQI and similar groups. The council features a Sunni chairman, Sheikh Sabah Khafaji, plus minor sheikhs of several other tribes, many of which have mixed Shi'a/Sunni membership. Khafaji expressed confidence that AQI had been rooted out of the area, and praised the coordination between coalition and Iraqi security forces. He was generally optimistic about the future, noting that the council has several initiatives to help the unemployed, including small grant and adult education programs.

15. (C) (Note: While the security situation has improved to the extent that walk-throughs were possible in both towns, events on August 8 indicated that the area is still very much contested. In Jurf as Sakhr, an SOI official was killed by an unidentified gunman. That same morning, with support from Coalition Forces, Iraqi Army and Police arrested 36 people in the broader Iskandariyah area, some of whom were suspected of AQI links, uncovering a significant stash of weapons in the

BAGHDAD 00002590 002 OF 002

process. End note.)

9,471 SOI

16. (C) When asked, Sunni contacts in North Babil expressed support in principle for the transition to PIC, planned for late 2008, though they questioned whether SOI members would really be allowed into the security forces. In an August 7 conversation with Gray, one prominent Janabi sheikh remarked that the provincial governor, police commander, and army commander -- all Shi'a -- have thus far not followed through on promises to integrate more tribal members. Tribal leaders appeared realistic about the possibilities, realizing that not many of the province's 9,471 SOI would be integrated into the ISF or find other employment. Sheikh Sabah al-Janabi told Gray he was primarily concerned about making sure ten percent of his members were integrated into the IP. MND-C officers confirmed that the sheikh's modest expectations were common among SOI leaders in the region. (See ref B for more on SOI integration programs.)

IP perspective

17. (C) To get further perspective, Gray met with IP Commander MG Fadhil at REO Hillah on August 7. Fadhil remarked that the province was basically ready for PIC transition, and outlined along with Colonel James the training infrastructure upgrades needed for PIC (as described in ref A). He believed that the ISF could handle security with back-up support from CF. Fadhil was also relatively sanguine about prospects for sectarian violence, noting that most violence in Babil these days is intra-Shi'a or intra-Sunni. Regarding SOI transition into the IP as part of the PIC process, Fadhil said that his department has turned in 2,000 IP application packets from SOI members to the Ministry of Interior, but has not yet received any response. Fadhil further remarked that his police force will need more than 2,000 new members to reach full capacity, suggesting that he could possibly take on more SOI members if needed. He sounded a bit exasperated by the lack of direction from his own Ministry about next steps, and

asked for USG assistance and guidance about what to do next.

Comment

18. (C) Security in North Babil and attitudes toward the USG have improved dramatically over the past year, due in large part to the recruitment of SOIs. Expectations for SOI participants after transition to PIC and GOI control of the SOI program appear moderate, and the general spirit of reconciliation expressed by local leaders is encouraging. Nevertheless, Sunni leaders in Babil still have little confidence that the Shi'a-run provincial and national governments will follow through on promises to find employment for their members. People in the area -- including Iraqi security officials -- are looking for further leadership from the USG on the issue, including pressure on the Maliki government to craft and implement long-term solutions. End Comment.

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